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**The Art of the Senses and the Making of a
Diasporan Aesthetics:
Zarina Bhimji's *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence*,
1987–2002**

Deborah Cherry

She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence est une œuvre d'environnement d'abord créée par Zarine Bhimji en 1987 dans laquelle quatre panneaux à double côté sont suspendus au-dessus du curcuma et du chili. L'essai de Cherry explore le rôle d'une interpellation multi-sensorielle dans la conception d'une esthétique de la diaspora et d'un travail artistique qui pense la migration.

She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence is an installation piece first created by Zarina Bhimji in 1987. Four panels were suspended from the ceiling on fine translucent strands (figure 1). Turmeric and chili powders were scat-

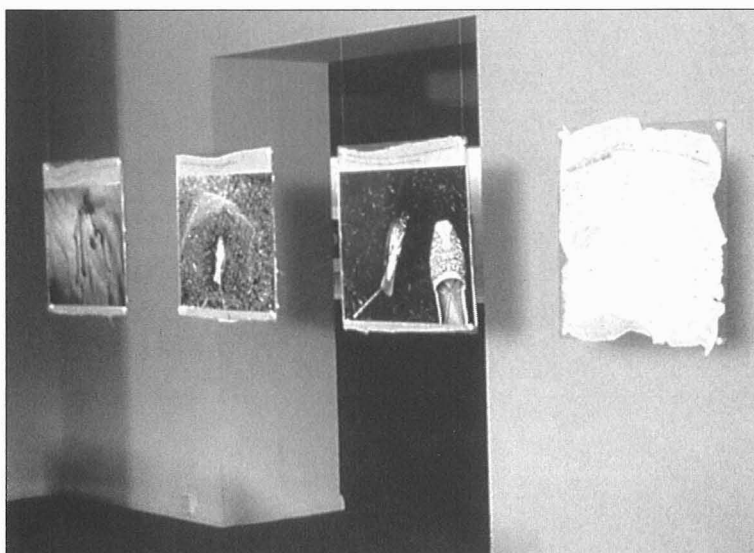


Figure 1. Zarina Bhimji, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* (1987)
Mixed media installation, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Exhibited at *Towards a Bigger Picture* (1989), Victoria and Albert Museum.
Photograph: Mark Haworth-Booth

tered on the floor below, as is shown in figure 2. The panels are double-sided; figure 3 shows the reverse. Between two pieces of roughly cut perspex are photographs laid on muslin, and in one, surgical gloves with a silk-screened print on the other side, again laid on muslin. On all four are lettrasetted characters in blue and red. The photographs, printed on bromide paper, portray from left to right jewellery laid on muslin, a slipper and a small bird laid on grass, a bird lying on or in a net; and on the other side, now viewing from right to left, a small bird out of focus, two slippers and a bird, and lastly, so returning to the panel with which I began, a small bird laid on grass.



Figure 2. Zarina Bhimji, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* (1987)
Mixed media installation, exhibited at

Towards a Bigger Picture (1989), Tate Gallery, Liverpool.

This shows the red and yellow spices scattered on the floor adjacent to the panels.

Installed, the panels float in space, moving slightly as spectators move round them. Little folds and strands of muslin escape; the perspex is only lightly pinned at each corner, exerting little pressure on the paper, fabric and gloves caught in-between. Bordering and borderless, the panels frame, but don't contain. The muslin skims under and over the perspex and paper, at times translucent, at others a filmy veil, a doubled screen. Transparent materials are overlaid with gauzy opacity. Fabric is duplicitous, seen in itself and in its image; it mimics paper as the surface for a

silk-screen print. This play with vision recurs in the photographic play with focus, at moments sharp and clear, at others misty, veiled, opaque. This hovering between clarity and an intentional ambiguity, intense detail and irresolution asks viewers to reflect on what they see at the same time as they may watch themselves watching. The perspex screens have a slight sheen (noticeable in figure 3), reflecting spectators back to themselves while bringing them into the work as participants. The perspex is contradictory; offering a window to what lies beneath, it is an enclosing boundary and an opening to what lies beyond: the room, its sources of light, the figures within it.

Neither still nor fixed to a surface, the panels wave restlessly; they are surrounded by the medium of breath, the air inhaled and exhaled by their viewers. She who loves to breathe is counterpointed, accompanied, watched, supplemented by those who are. The lettering invites the audience to come up close. Yet paradoxically this very proximity complicates the act of looking and reading, for any sudden movement or disturbance in the air sets the panels on the move again. Writing of their installation at the 1988 exhibition entitled *Essential Black Art*, Mark Haworth-Booth remarked, "the eye scanned them [the panels] as if they were on a film screen: as part of a surface rather than the contents of a frame" (qtd. in Bhimji, *I Will Always Be Here* n.p.). While this suggests a kind of viewing at odds with that given to the static, fixed image, it is less film with its rapid sequencing of still images into moving pictures which offers the most useful analogy. Rather, the closest analogy for the viewing practices solicited by this work is "scanning," that electronic capturing and relay of the image which in its replication, but not duplication, suggests the practices of cultural translation which are at work here. The liquid production of still photography – producing the image in light to set it on film and arrest it on paper – is here released back into motion. The images sway, flicker, gleam, almost imperceptibly, yet they remain still images on the move, each one with a separate momentum of its own.

By hanging the works, the artist makes a spatial gesture, completed by the intervention on the floor, the scattering of the spices. Haworth-Booth compares this gesture to Jackson Pollock's painting techniques (qtd. in Bhimji, *I Will Always Be Here* n.p.), and a closer comparison might be Helen Frankenthaler's staining since turmeric is used for its colour as well as for its savour. Laid out as colour, the spices invite looking; recognised as spices, they incite and tease the senses of smell, touch and taste. Reprising

minimalist and conceptual art's use of the floor/ground, the spices with their streaked and layered horizontality complete and respond to the verticality of the panels; the coincidences of the two substances mimic the enfolding and scrunching of the fabric in one of the panels above. The spices mark and transform the surface of the floor, bringing it into the work; and they also set a spatial definition, since participants / viewers are reluctant to tread on them. For this work, so concerned with edges as well as border-crossings, the boundaries are ambiguous, horizontally and vertically. The hanging panels equally offer a reply to Eve Hesse's suspended sculptures, such as *Contingent* of 1968-69. As Vanessa Corby has recently pointed out, Eve Hesse's is an art concerned with, indeed, contingent on the destruction of European Jewry in the first half of the 20th century (Corby 36-42). So Bhimji's model is not only an art historical one. But for Bhimji, who has expressed her admiration for this artist, trauma and loss are also knotted into the dislocation of family relationships in migration including that of the South Asian community from Uganda to Britain in the 1970s. The visa stamp replicates the artist's own.

* * *

She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence was purchased by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (PH 7208 ABC [1987]) and it is now housed in the Department of Photography, Prints and Drawings. Stored in the collection or placed on stands for viewing in the Print Room, it is necessarily dismantled (figures 3 and 4). The filaments have been snipped off. Restless movement has become stasis, flickering stilled to fixity. Perspective and viewing position have changed. Suspended, the panels provoke disorientation to a sense of physical balance: a small bird, empty slippers, laid on "the ground beneath her feet" (the reference is to Salman Rushdie's novel) hover in mid-air. Something seems to be missing from the dynamic charge present in the installation between the surface of the floor, and the vertiginous perspective of the photographs (notable in figure 1), taken with a camera held to a face looking vertically down to the ground or awkwardly, perhaps at a slant, at jewellery laid out on the rise and fall of cloth. Furthermore, the connection between the panels and the spices on the floor is broken. To acknowledge this is to realise the ways in which this art work as installation powerfully inscribed within it the positionality in and from which it was made. To enter the collections of the museum, the installation becomes photography. How else could it be preserved?

In *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*, Julie Reiss comments that photographic documentation, along with eyewitness reports, allows for the reconstruction of temporary and ephemeral pieces (xvi). But

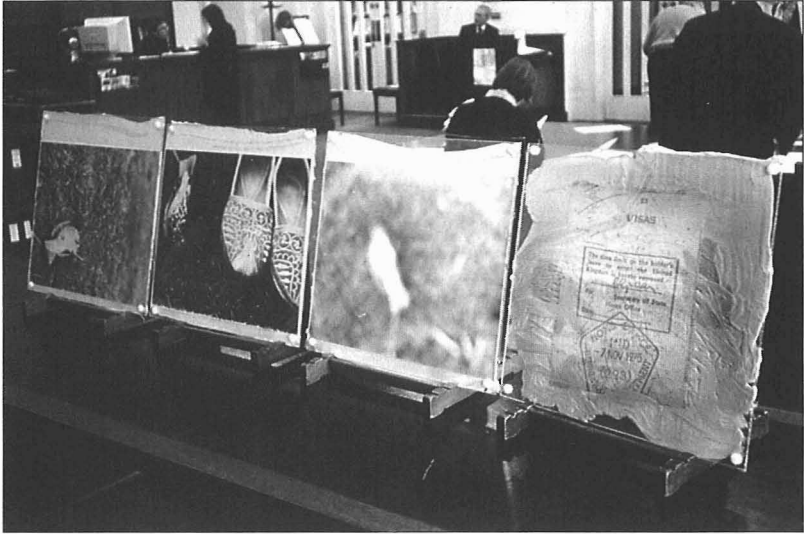


Figure 3. Zarina Bhimji, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* (1987)
4 panels displayed for study on stands in the Print Room,
Victoria and Albert Museum (2002). Photograph: the author.
The image shows the reverse view; the nearest panel with the visa stamp
has the surgical gloves laid on muslin on its other side.

all too often what remains, and what has entered the catalogue, are photographs of parts rather than images of the whole. The *Essential Black Art* catalogue offers a fragmented form. And this is not unusual; photographs of Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* and *Interim*, for example, generally provide partial views of panels rather than installation shots. While photography will inevitably play a part in accounts of installation art, there is much that will be elusive. Installation, as I am suggesting, fits awkwardly into archives preoccupied with and working in the two-dimensional. For the artist's file the spices appear transferred on to 35mm slidefilm. I think that it's worth imagining a history of installation art which doesn't reduce it to photography, if only because in making *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* Zarina Bhimji created a multi-sensory art work.

Installation art has become an important arena in post-colonial artistic practice and cultural criticism. It offers possibilities for deconstruction and reconfiguration, for remapping history and rehistoricizing space, for



Figure 4. Zarina Bhimji, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* (1987)

4 panels displayed for study on stands in the Print Room, Victoria and Albert Museum (2002). Photograph: the author.

The photograph also indicates the decomposition of the surgical gloves.

exploring the politics of location and the location of culture. Invariably described as a hybrid art, installation's potential for bringing together disparate objects and images has enabled the exploration of a diasporan aesthetics concerned with the scattering and re-collection of migration.

Sense memories, as Laura Marks reminds us, are elusive, unpredictable, and almost impossible to harbour. But because they may prompt memories when nothing else remembers, they have come to play a significant role in diasporan aesthetics. While some odours intensify with decomposition, the scent of the dried and ground spices in *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* dissipates from the moment they are released into the air. Yet though the aromatic smell disappears almost immediately, their colour remains; only when the spices are suspended in liquid can their flavour be tasted and their savour revived. The installation conjured rather than provided smells, the sight of the spices provoking an imaginative aromatic

sensation or memory. This sensation of a smell which isn't actually present recurs in another work by this artist, *I Will Always Be Here* (1992), for which tiny cotton *kurtas* were scorched and burnt. Smell doesn't have to be present. Rather its trace may trigger a response. This can be the case, even where the artist purposefully depletes the smell; as Hal Foster notes, substitute non-aromatic materials have often been preferred to raw or decomposing excreta, fresh slashes of blood, semen or vomit (Foster 160). It's not a question then of presence or absence, authenticity or simulacra, mind or body. The sense of smell, like that of sound, taste or touch can be teased, or provoked, in the imagination as much as in the body.

The changes to the spices parallel the changes which have taken place over time. The muslin has slipped in the frames. Colour has been transformed: once there were sharp contrasts between red, blue and white, countered by the pinkish tinges to the monochrome photographs and the red and yellow spices. The white fabric has yellowed. The greatest transformation has been to the panel containing the surgical gloves (figure 4): as they have decayed the gloves have fragmented, scattering particles into the muslin's folds, and as they have discoloured, they have stained the fabric unevenly. The light tinting to the birds, added by the artist, has almost disappeared. Although this ageing of the work was not, perhaps, anticipated by the artist, Zarina Bhimji has admitted a predilection for materials which decay. "I did not choose the materials for their sensual qualities. I am attracted more to their vulnerability, the possibility of decay" (the artist in conversation with Sonia Boyce, in *I Will Always Be Here*).

* * *

Time *in* the work see-saws with the time *of* the work, the time it takes to see/read it. Viewers must come close up to the work to read the text, all the more difficult because of the swaying of the panels and the slithering of the fabric. The texts must be teased out, studied over time, perused with care. As Mieke Bal has suggested in *Quoting Caravaggio*, this practice of "looking-in" slows down the viewer, arresting the pace of gallery-looking. The words dip and fall, seeming to echo inflections of speech and timbres of voice. Placed on one side of the panels, the lettering can be seen in reverse on the other. From left to right it reads,

SLOWLY SHE RAISED HER ARM, THIN DARK BROWN IN THE
SUN-HAZE CIRCLED BY TWO HEAVY GOLD BANGLES. THIS
HAD COME FROM HOME – EVERY ISMAILI GIRL WORE FROM
BIRTH

IT WAS THE MOTHER AND OTHERS, AS THEY WERE ALIKE –
THOSE WATCHFUL, WRATHFUL WOMEN WHOSE EYES SEARED
– LAID BARE THOSE TONGUES THAT LASHED THE WORLD IN
UNREMITTING DISTRUST

THE ANGER TURNED IN-WARD, WHERE COULD IT GO
EXCEPT TO MAKE PAIN? IT FLOWED INTO ME WITH HER MILK

EACH MORNING AT 5AM THEY SCRUBBED THE FLOOR –
SOME ONE OFFERED HER A DAY'S WORK. SOMETIMES THESE
WHITE PEOPLE ON THE WAY TO WORK LAUGHED AT THEIR
INDIANESS . . . SHOUTED PAKI: *AAPRI BHENO*, SUCKED THEIR
TEETH DISMISSING THEM.

The work doesn't make a sound, yet it is filled with voices. How are we to heed these texts: as unconnected, as one by one, in sequence from left to right, or right to left? Are they spoken in the first person, in conversation or dialogue, or reported as third person narrative. They seem to switch between all three, encompassing the intimacies and betrayals of mothers and daughters, the inner speech of the individual subject, the forcefulness of spoken declaration, the anger of response, the violence of racism. The artist has said that in making the work she visited Heathrow numerous times to talk to Asian women working at the airport, which is for many the site of entry into Britain. At moments, the voices are close-up, akin to the intensity and intimacy of the photographic detail. Like the photographs, they inscribe positionality, a perspective which watches the "watchful, wrathful women," observes "these white people," hears the sharp intake of breath and ripple of saliva. They offer no closure or resolution. Hovering irresolutely between audible speech and visible writing, the texts enter the work into an aural culture, another marker of this multi-sensory art work.

The images in the photographs, close-ups seen from above, come into a new vision, seen with, alongside, beneath, through the texts. Ordinary everyday objects such as a slipper and jewellery come to have extraordinary significance. Texts and textiles, images and spices, intimate a haunting theme of migration across borders and between cultures, echoed in the

shifting, restless movement of the panels, the disturbance of the reflections on their surfaces. Zarina Bhimji has stated her desire to create works which bring together objects, fantasies and memories from East Africa, India and Britain (*I Will Always Be Here*). The slipper on the grass delicately points to the complexities of dislocation and relocation. The spices have migrated across the globe: as valuable commodities they have been sought after by traders and merchants, fought over in imperial conquest. And while they add pungency to many dishes produced in South Asia, both turmeric and chili are also used as additives in the western food industry. But their uses go beyond the culinary. For the artist chili "has many overtones – it is strong and passionate" (Artist's File). And in recent years, as she has noted, it was used by South Asian people in Britain to ward off street attackers: chili stings the eyes but causes no physical harm.

A long philosophical tradition in the west has considered the voice to be a personal and intimate expression of the self. Yet the voice is communal as well as personal. Having a voice and being heard are closely linked to having individual and collective rights and social/political representation, as Jonathan Rée suggests (1-11). Questions of voice and presence have become particularly important in post-colonial studies, taking a lead from the magisterial interrogation of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" For Zarina Bhimji voice is juxtaposed to silence. Silence can suggest tranquillity, the absence of sound, that absorbing quietude which allows "looking-in." It can also suggest the deafening void when speech is no more. In this sense, *She Loved to Breathe–Pure Silence* is an elegiac mourning conjuring a rite of passage out of the air she loved to breathe into the silence of death. Its title indicates the past tense and the small dead thrush speaks of mortality. But silence is also as an active force of unhearing; it is the refusal or denial of communication, a failure in translation, an epistemic break.

On one panel there appears an enlarged replication of a visa stamp which states: "The time limit on the holder's leave to enter the United Kingdom is hereby removed / for Secretary of State, Home Office, dated 7 November 1975 (figure 3). *She Loved to Breathe–Pure Silence* is thus a historical work; its photographs having been taken in London and Leicester in March 1985 and 1987, the work also refers to a precise moment 12 years earlier. The visa stamp conferred an official permission to remain in the United Kingdom. Caught up in the traumas and upheavals of decolonisation, the artist's family, like many others, left Uganda in General Idi

Amin's expulsion of the Asian population. They ran head on into the British government's emergency legislation on immigration and nationality.

From 1962 to 1981 public debates and government policy on immigration were fuelled by newspaper campaigns and the heightened political rhetoric of the far right which stirred fears of Britain's national culture being swamped by outsiders and "floods" of immigrants. A raft of legislation differentiated on racial grounds between settlers from Commonwealth countries, prioritising access for white migrants and increasingly restricting entrance to other applicants. Over this period, a number of highly public deportations of South Asian women were conducted and the "new racism" worked with common-sense notions to promote discrimination, high levels of policing and repatriation. In the later 1970s "virginity tests" were imposed on South Asian women arriving at Heathrow.

It is these contentious events to which the panel with surgical gloves alludes. In the artist's statement which she made for the Victoria and Albert Museum, Zarina Bhimji states "The work is not just about virginity tests – that is simply one example and a reminder of what life can be outside gallery walls"; and she provides a number of quotations from the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, published in February and March 1979: "Immigrant women are being subjected to intimate gynaecological examination on entry into Britain." "He was wearing rubber gloves and took some medicine out of a tube and put it on some cotton and inserted it into me. He said he was deciding whether I was pregnant now or had been pregnant before." The surgical gloves laid on fine, soft muslin point to intimate physical examination. Unlike the other panels, here the fabric here is scrunched and creased, and the gloves, as they decay, seem to be probing its folds and tucks. A violating touch is introduced, only to be countered by the touches, tastes and scents of an intimacy in which women friends and relatives rub the bride's skin with turmeric before her wedding (Bhimji, Artist's File), the scattered spices intimating a rite of passage in femininity which parallels the rites of passage which accompany migration. Touch, so necessary to the making of the work is present in its constituent parts: this artist who has so often worked with fragile and damaged fabrics, has spoken of the sensory pleasures, anxieties and memories which they evoke. In an interview, she remarks, "textiles do recur as a motif. I do take pleasure in them – the feel of pure silk or cotton, almost like skin" (*I Will Always Be Here*). With touch, in its difference, comes a

declared sexual politics inseparable from a politics of race, a politics resistant to the sexualised and racialised violation of Asian women.

Although dramatic confrontation and racially motivated attacks and murders increased in the 1970s and early 1980s, they were accompanied by vigorous resistance, anti-racism demonstrations, and strong Asian and Black women's movements which questioned the politics of visual representation as well as attacking the racist and sexist employment practices in which Asian women worked in low-grade, low-paid jobs. The challenge to white feminism took place in many arenas including visual culture. *For the White Feminist* (in response to the *F-stops Exhibition*), a photo-text work printed on photographic paper stained a copper colour, dates from the same period as *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence*. For Jyll Bradley, "Bhimji was using the 'new' languages of sight to discuss what was silenced. *For the White Feminist* addressed this in subtle ways – the upsetting of a bowl, a foot penetrating the frame of a tray" (Bradley 23). What is significant in both works are the crossings and exchanges between theory and practice in the forging of this politics of feminism re-defined around the concerns of race and difference. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has so eloquently argued, theory and practice are inter-dependent, and if theory situates and structures practice, "no practice takes place without presupposing itself as an example of some more or less powerful theory" (*Post-Colonial Critic* 120).

In a landmark essay on the media imagery of South Asian women, first published in 1984, Pratibha Parmar analysed the production of a "pathology" of Asian women polarised around "hateful contraries": submissive and tradition-bound victims of forced marriages and seclusion; exotic and erotic prostitutes; subjects of deportation; estranged wives and mothers. She voiced a not-uncommon concern: "How do you represent in images the resistance and strength of Asian women in their daily struggles to survive the onslaught of racism?" For Zarina Bhimji, *She Loved to Breathe—Pure Silence* is not just a work composed of images or about images, but a complex piece about the senses. This installation, which asks its viewers to look up close, to look into the work, and to observe the detail, also asks its participants, caught into the work by seeing their reflections, to meditate on the senses and the interactions of touch, smell, taste, and sound, together with this changed modality of seeing. And it is this multi-sensory address which (re)connects art to politics and social life. As the artist stated, "The work is not just about virginity tests – that is simply one example and a reminder of what life can be outside gallery walls."

Notes

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